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ABSTRACT

Development, implementation, and teaching of a college-level course on dying and death are described. The authors review their own experiences in becoming involved with death education and describe teaching methods, problems, and content of their current course in dying and death at the State University of New York, College at New Paltz. Because of the large student enrollment, the approach is a lecture class for 200 students combined with small group sessions for 20 students each week at the instructor's home. Course goals are to explore the sociological implications of death, examine the social-psychological and institutional aspects of death in American society, and develop a personal understanding of death. Topics include death and social behavior, bereavement and grief, abortion and euthanasia, accidents and disasters, homicide and suicide, social meanings of the funeral, and living with dying and death. The course utilizes lectures, readings, films, and one-to-one discussion especially with students who have difficulty dealing with emotional reactions to the subject. Among the possible problems inherent in teaching about dying and death are the tendency of some academic departments to offer courses on death simply to increase departmental enrollment figures, danger of disciplinary compartmentalization when one department claims the sole right to offer death courses, proliferation of poorly-taught courses in response to student interest, and use of death courses to insulate against the pain of personal loss and grief. (AV)

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TEACHING ABOUT DEATH TO UNDERGRADUATES

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Since the 1958 publication of the article "The Sociology of Death: A Neglected Area of Research" by William Faunce and Robert Fulton, an increasing number of sociologists not only have become interested in the field, but also have begun teaching about it in dying and death courses. As this interest has developed, a parallel one in many academic disciplines also has evolved, and today there are numerous undergraduate courses being taught on the subject.

Initially, courses reflecting an interest in dying and death were introduced in experimental classes, seminar settings, or as a special topic in a course. Over time, however, dying and death became the sole focus of courses in colleges and universities across the country. In many such courses, an interested teacher has assembled a reading list and then approached the course from a perspective which generally reflects personal interest and knowledge. In many schools, the new courses on death have attracted a bumper crop of students, and many are closed out during pre- or early registration, attesting to their popularity, even if not their quality.

Since the institutions which traditionally provided socialization experiences for dying and death have changed both quantitatively and qualitatively, I feel that courses on death are not just beneficial, but that they have become a necessary aspect of the American style of socialization. Given the failure of most of these other institutions to deal with death in present-day society, educational socialization seems essential. Thus, for American students, death courses, seminars, projects, minicourses, and so forth provide an opportunity for the acquisition of experiential knowledge regarding dying and death.

Despite the growing interest in the field and the development of new courses, thus far, there are but a few logically articulated and systematic treatments which deal with teaching about death. Given the special nature of the subject matter, a discussion about the teaching of such a course seems long overdue. The purpose of this paper is to describe and discuss the development, implementation, and teaching of a course on dying and death.

Personal Background

The chronological record of courses offered on death is not complete. However, the proliferation of written material and the delineation of well defined research issues, hypotheses, and theories in the area of dying and death led to attempts at coalescence in the form of formal academic instruction in the field. Furthermore, with the academic reformation of the 1960's and early 1970's, and the resultant consideration of student interests and desires, there arose considerable demand for specialized courses, including courses on death. The first regular Sociology course offered in an American university which focused solely on death was taught by Robert Fulton in the Spring of 1963 at the University of Minnesota.

My first personal experience with a death course was in 1966-1967 when a group of students at Dartmouth College established an experimental course called "Death" and asked me to participate. The design of the course was eclectic and relied upon various "death experts," such as a clergyperson, a funeral director, a doctor, a psychiatrist, a sociologist, and so forth. The student organizers of the course anticipated that about ten students would enroll. Instead, over thirty signed up and the course had the second largest enrollment

of all the courses in the experimental college. There was an absence of an overall organized orientation, and the course was somewhat uneven in terms of composition, presentation, and outlook. Even so, it successfully dealt with student questions and points of interest.

Another experience which exposed me to student interest occurred in 1970 when I was asked to speak at a high school "Humanities Day." The program was the first of its kind for this school, and the students assembled a smorgasbord of courses on many subjects, including scuba diving, the American Civil Liberties Union, rock music, and death. I agreed to speak for one class period, but was then asked to give two presentations because too many students had registered for the one class on death. Each session was attended by a large number of students, and "Death" turned out to be the most attended presentation of the day. Since that time, I have appeared at many high schools to discuss death and always have met with a full house of people.

A third experience came about in 1971 when I taught a special topics course on death through our Department of Continuing Education. It was offered one night a week for six weeks as a non-credit course, and required a special tuition fee. During the course, I was interested that a large number of regular undergraduate students requested course outlines and asked if it was going to be offered as a regular course. As a result, I began to develop a reading list and an underlying rationale for the course. During the winter, a formal application was submitted, the proposal was accepted by the Department of Sociology and the College Curriculum Committee, and it was scheduled to be offered in the Fall of 1973. At that time, 160 students enrolled.

Guidelines for Teaching About Death

Out of these experiences have emerged several suggestions and guidelines for teaching a course on death. Given careful thought and planning, such a course can be very rewarding for the instructor as well as for the students.

First, it is important for each course to be designed to fit its individual instructor. For example, some teachers may be more comfortable dealing with a fairly small number of selected students who participate at a very active interpersonal level, while others may be more comfortable with a large class. While developing my course, I felt that based on the large student demand, it should be offered to as many undergraduates as possible. Thus, my approach is a large lecture class in which approximately 200 students enroll each semester.

Because of the class size, individual and small group discussions were inhibited, if not impossible. To provide an opportunity for more personal interaction, one night each week I invited a group of about 20 students to my home to discuss issues of concern related to the course. These sessions have remained deliberately non-academic, and my main concern has been that students feel free to participate actively and to discuss any aspect of the course they wish. Put simply, no question or concern is too trivial to be considered and discussed. The discussions range from descriptions of personal experiences with death, to consideration of such issues as suicide, abortion, and euthanasia, to philosophical issues about the meaning of death and its impact on life.

In addition to practical matters such as the enrollment, while planning

a death course, it is important to develop a general theoretical position that is both usable and pragmatic regarding the impact of death. In this regard, it is especially important for teachers dealing with dying and death to understand their own personal theory of the topic.

It is important to consider both manifest versus latent issues in courses on death. Manifest issues involve such things as the course outline, the planned curriculum, the anticipated outcome or goal of the course, and its stated objectives. Latent issues involve such things as the particular viewpoint or bias of the teacher, the influence of extracurricular experiences, and the students' personal needs. It is not necessarily advisable (nor possible) to try to rid oneself of all latent consequences. Rather, it is important for one to be aware that there are issues which remain latent and which influence ideas, teaching beliefs, and so forth. It is crucial for the teacher to recognize such latent issues and to compensate for them by attempting to provide a value neutral forum for discussion and education.

As is the case with any course, it is necessary for an instructor to determine the goals of the course, and to direct the curriculum toward the fulfillment of those goals. Of course, the goals set are necessarily related to the instructor's orientation and general theoretical position regarding the impact of death.

The goals of my course were and still are (1) to explore the sociological implications of death, (2) to examine the unique social-psychological, social-structural, cultural, and institutional components of death from the distinctly American perspective, even though it is a universal phenomenon, and (3) to gain

a better understanding of the meaning of death on a personal, individual level.

My course presents primarily a sociological view of death in American society, and deals with the following topics: Dying and death; dying, death, and demography; dying, death, and social behavior; dying, death, and mental health; the social organization of dying and death; loss and loss-threat; bereavement and grief; abortion and euthanasia; accidents and disasters; homicide and suicide; death-related communication; the caretakers of the dying and dead; social meanings of the funeral; and living with dying and death.

The general format of the course includes lectures on these topics which are intended to stimulate thinking, to present new information, and to help delineate the unique place of death in American society. Often, the lectures elaborate on information derived from the reading material.

The readings for the course are selected each semester to provide the fullest coverage of the field in the most compact and interesting fashion possible. There are many possible books which can be used, some of which are listed in the bibliography.

In addition to the presentation of factual material, research findings, and major theories about the topic, I utilize a humanistic approach to the subject matter. An important reason for this is that those in the course consistently have become deeply involved in and concerned about various aspects of dying and death, and as a result, many have experienced questions about or changes in attitudes, values, and opinions. I believe that these kinds of changes must be dealt with both on a personal level and in the classroom.

Furthermore, I am convinced that to intellectualize dying and death too abstractly may lead to a futile attempt to deny their reality and impact on social behavior. Thus, I often offer practical everyday comments on the subject that relate to some of the "drier" course material.

There are a number of films which treat aspects of dying and death effectively, and student interest is considerably increased by those shown in the class. Often, they provide the humanistic treatment of a topic that may be necessarily absent in a lecture setting, and they help students to confront their own feelings and to express themselves on the subject.

There are required exams based on the factual material presented in the readings and lectures, brief written assignments, an optional book review, and an optional term paper. For those students who choose to do them, the book review and the term paper present an opportunity to integrate their own thoughts with those of researchers and writers in the field and to apply the practical and intellectual material obtained from the course readings and lectures.

It is important to recognize that a course on dying and death often elicits powerful emotional reactions from some students that may be the result of personal experiences with death, a general fear of death, and so forth. I believe that such reactions must be allowed to be expressed and should not be supressed. If students wish to do so, private conversations are helpful, especially if the emotions expressed are dealt with in a straightforward fashion. If you feel that you personally will not be able to handle these situations, prepare yourself by having someone to whom you can refer these individuals. Of course, because of potentially strong emotional reactions, students <u>should not be forced</u>

to participate in any discussion or activity. No question on the part of any student should be treated lightly and anything should be seen as an honest concern. When knowledge fails, it is better to give an honest answer and to say "I don't know" than it is to bluff it.

There are some problems inherent in teaching about death that deserve serious consideration. First, it is possible to decide to teach about death for the wrong reasons. For example, some academic departments have instituted courses on death in an effort to increase their enrollment. Unfortunately, in some such situations, the instructor's skills, interests, and competencies are not taken into account, sometimes resulting in the mishandling of the course.

Second, one should not teach about death to get across a particular perspective. For example, a death course focusing solely on the negative aspects of American institutional care may reflect a bias that is counterproductive. Or, a course taught by a vested interest group such as a myopic memorial society or a one-sided funeral service organization may ill-equip students to deal with the reality of death and its impact.

Third, death courses have the danger of disciplinary compartmentalization which occurs when one particular department or academic discipline adopts the stance that they alone can teach about death. It is important to keep in mind that the field evolved from a multidisciplinary base and has long been viewed as multifaceted. It is important for this view to be maintained.

Fourth, there is the possibility that the field of death may suffer from a parallel to Gresham's Law of Economics. This is the principle that in the everyday circulation of money, "bad money drives out good money." The applica-

tion of this principle can be fitted to the enormous growth of published material and courses about dying and death. On the one hand, publications which are ill-conceived, non-scholarly, and poorly done may overwhelm those of excellence and integrity. Thus, the field may be faced with a body of literature that is so weak and diluted that it is ineffective in dealing with the issues. On the other hand, because of their popularity and appeal, poorly conceived courses on death may proliferate to such an extent that they drive out good ones, and death education will become a handicap to the students.

Fifth, courses on death may actually be used as a means to deny death. For example, it is possible for a course to be so abstract or lacking in humanistic perspective that the course itself becomes a means of denying. Furthermore, by believing that a course on death can insulate against the pain of loss and grief, some teachers and students may use such a course for purposes of denying. Thus, the sophisticated use of academic garb to surround the volatile subject of death can foster the very denial of death that so many have worked so long to overcome.

The quality of a course on death depends upon the educational climate that exists, the willingness and ability to direct the educational concerns to the students, and the extent to which such a course deals with the "real life" or everyday issues that are of concern to most students. In other words, more than most other courses, one on death must address itself to the concerns of its students rather than to some abstract standard.

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